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Gains In Productivity Predicted

By Paul Wagman

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The productivity of American workers, which has been on the wane since the late 1960s, will likely resume its upward path this decade, the co-chairman of the White House Conference on Productivity says.

L. William Seidman, the conference leader, said he thinks the gain will result in part from new technologies and new management systems which have become increasingly popular in the last three or four years. In addition, productivity will increase as some of the obstacles in its way are better understood and corrected, he said.

Seidman is in St. Louis this week to participate in one of four conferences being held around the country as a prelude to the White House Conference in Washington on Sept. 22 and 23. The conference here is assembling some of the top authorities in the nation to discuss productivity issues as they are related to human resources.

The conference, which is being held at St. Louis University today and tomorrow, is also attracting two top administration officials to St. Louis. Secretary of Education Terrell Bell was scheduled to address the group today, and Secretary of Labor Raymond Donovan is slated to talk at 9 a.m. Thursday.

All of the preparatory conferences, as well as the final conference in Washington, are devoted to a better understanding of America's decline in productivity, defined as worker output per hour. The conferences are also intended to advance solutions for consideration by the president and the Congress.

Productivity has become a major economic issue in recent years because of its steady deterioration. After growing at an average annual rate of 3.1 percent between 1948 and 1967, it slid to 2.3 percent between 1967 and 1973 and then .8 percent for the balance of the decade.

The decline is important, Seidman said, because increased productivity is what gives companies the wherewithal to make wage increases. Jobs also are dependent on increased productivity, because companies cannot compete in world markets without being highly productive, he said. "So this conference is really about wage raises and jobs."

Seidman said.

Many reasons have been put forth for the decline in American productivity but the trend remains

rather puzzling, economists say. Some of the explanations include: the comparatively low savings rate, which decreases capital spending; antagonistic relations among labor, management and government, which results in large business expenditures unlikely to improve productivity; the influx into the labor force of unskilled young workers from the baby-boom generation; mandatory spending on environmental protection; a tax system which curbs investment innovation and entrepreneurship; the pernicious effects of inflation; and a decline in the work ethic.

Seidman said he expects the White House Conference to play a significant role in sorting these factors out and tackling the problem. A White House conference on inflation which he chaired during the administration of President Gerald R. Ford helped lead to the deregulation of the trucking, airlines and other industries, he said.

"I think it (the White House Conference) has an important influence on decision makers," Seidman said. "Not the sole influence, but an important influence."

The group gathering in St. Louis this week includes representatives from business, government, labor and education. Among the 40 persons scheduled to participate are John T. Dunlop, Secretary of Labor under President Ford; William Freund, chief economist of the New York Stock Exchange; Malcolm Lovell, deputy assistant Secretary of Labor under President Richard M. Nixon; and Harold Buoy, retired president of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers.

The group is non-partisan, Seidman said. Had it been otherwise, he said, he would not have accepted the job of co-chairman, because the conference's usefulness would have been destroyed.

Much of the conference's work, it seems, might be accomplished by just listening to what Seidman himself has to say on the topic. The man is the incarnation of productivity.

Currently dean of the College of Business Administration at Arizona State University, Seidman, 62, was assistant to the president for economic affairs from 1974 to 1977 under Ford. He has organized a college and a sky club. He is a certified public accountant, a lawyer, an economist, a teacher and an administrator. When he was interviewed Tuesday, he was wearing his jogging clothes, in preparation for a two-mile ramble through St. Louis' noonday heat.

Asked for his secret, Seidman said that part of it was concentrating on things which he does well. That way he likes what he is doing and spends a lot